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On whatever side of the question respecting the average mental degeneracy of the moderns, the truth may happen to lie, it is certain that in the external decorations and in the completion of civilization a constant advance is discernible; from the solid

to the shell, from the substantial to the ephemeral, from the giant to the dwarf. The tinsel of civilisation grows as fast as the moss of centuries. Her appearance is constantly changed, by the superaddition of more tawdry habiliments; while the rags and tatters of a thousand changes of raiment are veiled beneath them, decaying and decayed.

But when opposed to nature is littleness entrusted with grandeur; the contemptible to the sublime; imitation to originality. And, although by the industry of ages, she has fathomed the mighty secrets of her mistress, detected her arcana, and given her a voice immortal as herself—Art is still but the cruible of clay; and the pure gold which she extracts is from the mine of nature.

Who then will wonder at the apparently premature debut of the mind, in the first annals of our

-ded time? Who should it be thought extraordinary, that the Father of song left his sons at a hopeless distance; that the Pyramids and Stonehenge are left as objects of curiosity which can never be gratified, as examples which can never be imitated? If gigantic bones, unparalleled in the memory of man, proclaim the physical strength of the men of elder days, it is because nature exulted gloried in her supreme domination. And if the relics of his intellectual exertions, and exhibitions of his imitative powers are the greatest as they are oldest, it is because he made a more immediate transcript from the great original, nature.

When the novelty of that original ceased, the resources of art became fewer. Imitators imitated an imitator, originality became a gem in its casket, while the current coin were the rest of antiquity. The successive views

tions of the different orders of architecture are the most certain and definite examples of the changes from majesty to beauty; from the noble grand to the finely polished.

As the fashion of the world passes away, it reaches the point when it ought to be stationary; but nothing is stationary in our inconstant state of progression. The modesty of every thing is immediately overstepped, like the manly Doric, was the dress, the furniture the amusements of the first ages. They were coarse in their grandeur; but unhappily they could not long the one characteristic, while they retained the other. The matron grace of the Ionic attended the dignity of its predecessor; but the luxuriant Corinthian had neither the sublimity of the first or chastity of the second order.

Mankind have long ago grasped the ultimate point of the

decorum of taste, in the costume of society. Every succeeding age, in its fashionable paraphernalia seems to be more flippant and to abound more in frippery, on an average, than that which preceded it.

If we were to confine our remarks merely to the modes of dress and habits of life in the intercourse of society, we should find abundant scope for illustration and exemplification. But these are different in every climate and country, and preserve some identity in each. The stage furnishes the finest example, as it is the common inheritance of all civilized nations; proud of acknowledging its illustrious ancestry, and vied with the first advances of knowledge.

We may remark, that when Bacchus and his Satyrs were banished from the rude travelling theatres of Attica, the first author whose genius was to give to scenic representation the power that has made it and its founder immortal, was, like his great original

destined to equal if not to outstance all who have succeeded him. In the loftiness of his conceptions, the majesty of his language, the grandeur and sublimity of his images, Æschilus was original not merely as the first in time, but as the first in talent of the Greek tragic poets. In the days when he wrote his genius outstripped the bounds of the infant art; the audience forgot the poet, the actors, the stage — they realized the passions represented before them, and the civil authority were compelled to interpose their authority, to prevent the introduction of revolutions and anarchy.

The irritable Euripides, and the tender Sophocles, were more chaste and more regular; they gave the dramatic laws — but they left nature in no doubt. The chorus, that commanding & wild member of every Grecian plot, became stiffer and more formal and unnatural than ever; the furies poured their armies on the stage; no terrific incantations conjured up infernal majesty; — passion flowed out

in smooth iambics; and dialogue lost its energy in speeches of a tiresome length. The cold, didactic chorus, made high wrought feeling almost ridiculous in its answers. Comedy made the shackles of the Grecian drama less cumbersome; but in what condition do we find the stage in the days of Aristophanes? The grossest obscenities, the most unabashed insults, or else extravagant scenery were alone palatable to the degenerate Athenians; three generations were sufficient to produce this dereliction from nature, taste and sentiment.

Ennius too began like Aeschylus by taking his fables from the fathers of romance. Horace informs us of the state of the stage in his time — it corresponds with that of Greece, and with our own. The insania gaudia oculorum were now alone in requisition. Countless arts conquered, not to enrich the drama by new development of proper themes, new information, or new imagery; but to load the stage with splendid shadows;

to corrupt entirely a gust already vitiated to destroy the last vestiges of enervated taste. The wardrobes of Decadius were insufficient for one spectacle, and shews of beasts proclaimed literally the asymmetry, the complexion and character of the spectators.

In many striking particulars our own land of Britain resembles Athens. But we cannot digress in drawing a parallel between these two principal favourites of the muses — which were unlike in point of their relative situation as to time, their influence on the tone of the drama, and its subsequent character, and also as it regards the strength, versatility and bent of their genius. We have reason to be thankful that the blemishes of Shakspeare are as numerous as critics can reckon. The very licentiousness of the times in which he wrote is to be blest; — for fastidiousness would have marred him other than we find him; and

how can we endure them changed without detriment? The audience who frequented the theatres of his day, went prepared to enjoy a treat of wit, sentiment, scenic allusion and dramatic effect. For their shilling a piece, they demanded a full repast; and such they had. The play professed vanity, sufficient to gained them fame enough; without the necessity of a long theatrical bill of fare; which like French cookery, covers more of plate, but contains infinitely less nutriment than substantial domestic diet.

Throughout all its changes, since the days of Shakspeare, none of which have, on the whole, been for the better, the drama seems at the present day, to be at its lowest ebb. Our theatres are more splendid than they were in the days of our ancestors. The pomp and circumstance of scenic machinery are more imposing; but the drama itself languishes; became

the taste which should support it, though not to enter into a disquisition, for which we are neither competent or inclined, on the abuses of modern theatrical entertainments, it will be barely necessary to notice one grand trait in their character.

The good old rule, that a play should be neither ~~more nor~~ longer nor shorter than five acts, has been lately disregarded entirely, for we are not so absurd, as to attach any value to that which has nothing but mere precept to support it, nor do we place any confidence in the virtue of odd numbers. But when a canon is once fixed and established in matters of so arbitrary a nature, no idle pretext should be allowed to violate it. While the farce pretends to no more than the excitement of a little merriment, and dreams of no plot but that of deceiving a guardian, a play aspires to a higher character. Independently of the sentiment and language, we look for an interesting concatenation of incidents, suspended sufficiently in their development to keep us awake to the hopes and fears of the dramatis per-

once, and uncertain as to the result. In less than five moderate acts this can scarcely be happily accomplished. The last New comedy† produced on the New York boards, contained four acts, an anomaly we believe in the drama. The good old stock plays†† are constantly cut down to three acts; without any apparent regard to reason. For characters are introduced without any visible connection with the plot; the most striking incidents become bald, forced and unnatural; in brief, the play becomes a mere Melo drama.

The modern taste seems to be for this strange mixture of curious scenery, tumbling down waterfalls, and singing. These monsters of modern corrupted taste are in plot, and conduct, the farthest removed from nature of any other effort of imitative art. We have no room to notice the long catalogue of stories, hitherto monopolized by the mercy which are now brought out with all the strength

† Torch Light. †† E. g. Mountaineers.

of scenic power. A melodrama must have, in the first place, an incredible incident as the basis of the fable; if possible, the introduction of beasts as principal characters, will heighten the effect; and all the principal persons of the drama, heroines and heros, kings or pickpockets, must indispensably know how to sing. This talent they must exercise at the most unproper conjunctures; when not a moment is to be lost in the plot; they must stay to sing a song, and, if possible, be encored & and recollect one melodrama, where, in an occasion when profound silence was necessary, they all sang 'Hush', as loud as they could bawl.

Greece and Rome were in their decline, when their drama had degenerated into show; and it may be a question, whether a regeneration can take place in our stage; without a national convulsion to alter the complexion of popular character. But the gaining of our own country yet slumbering — hapely we may live to behold its resurrection.

S.